What is Claimed is:

1. A method of conducting an online auction on a communications network, the method comprising:

a first user terminal generating an offer to sell or to buy an item in accordance with first offer criteria;

a second user terminal generating an offer to buy or to sell a corresponding item in accordance with second offer criteria;

comparing the offer criteria to match an offer to sell and an offer to buy if any or all of their criteria match;

in response to a match between the offers, opening a peer to peer communication channel between the user terminals that made the matching offers; and

conducting an auction between those user terminals via the communication channel.

2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising using the criteria of an offer to search for offers with matching criteria.

3. The method of Claim 2, wherein the search is conducted on a central database accessible by the user terminals, to which database the offers are transmitted.

4. The method of Claim 3, wherein the database is associated with a server to which the user terminals are clients.

5. The method of Claim 4, wherein comparison and matching of offer criteria are performed at the server end.

6. The method of Claim 2, wherein the search is conducted across the communications network of which the user terminals are a part.

7. The method of Claim 6, wherein an offer is broadcast by a user terminal to other user terminals on the network.

8. The method of Claim 6, wherein an offer is sent by a user terminal to a group of other user terminals defined by the sending user terminal.

9. The method of Claim 8, wherein the offer is forwarded by user terminals of the group to other user terminals or to other groups of user terminals.

10. The method of Claim 7, wherein comparison and matching of offer criteria are performed by a user terminal that receives an offer from another user terminal.

11. The method of Claim 10, wherein the received offer is compared with an offer generated by and stored by the user terminal that receives the offer.

12. The method of Claim 1, wherein an offer is stored in readiness for comparison and matching with a subsequent offer.

13. The method of Claim 12, wherein the offer is stored for a timeout period.

14. The method of Claim 1, wherein the offers are generated by software agents resident on the respective user terminals.

15. The method of Claim 14, wherein a software agent searches for matching offers across the communications network.

16. The method of Claim 15, wherein a software agent receives, compares and matches offers.

17. The method of Claim 14, wherein a software agent opens the peer to peer communication channel between user terminals in response to a match between offers.

18. The method of Claim 14, wherein a software agent creates an auction on a user terminal.

19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the software agent runs the auction as a background task on the desktop of the user terminal.

20. The method of Claim 14, wherein a seller agent makes an offer to sell an item.

21. The method of Claim 20, wherein the seller agent receives bids for the item on its user's behalf.

22. The method of Claim 21, wherein the seller agent responds to bids automatically on its user's behalf.

23. The method of Claim 21, wherein the seller agent responds to bids in accordance with real time instructions of its user.

24. The method of Claim 14, wherein a buyer agent makes an offer to buy an item.

25. The method of Claim 24, wherein the buyer agent bids for an item during the auction.

26. The method of Claim 25, wherein the buyer agent bids automatically on its user's behalf.